

**Lone parents and welfare to work
interventions
Synthesis of qualitative studies**

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A systematic review of qualitative evidence on the health and wellbeing impacts of welfare to work interventions on lone parents and their children.

Introduction

Recent estimates suggest that there are approximately 1.96 million lone parents in the UK (Office for National Statistics 2011). Of these, 510,000 were out of work and claiming Income Support in November 2012 (Department for Work and Pensions 2013). In the UK, since 2008 changes have been rolled out for eligibility to Income Support. From May 2012, lone parents whose youngest child is aged 5 years or over are not able to claim Income Support on the basis of parenthood. As a result of these changes, there were a further 150,000 lone parents in receipt of Job Seekers Allowance and expected to be available for work (Department for Work and Pensions 2013).

Similar changes have taken place in other Western countries. In the USA since 1996 welfare reform policy has replaced welfare programmes such as Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). This initiative is not directly aimed at lone parents however in 2010 only 5 per cent of families receiving TANF included two parents (Office of Family Assistance 2012). TANF has time limits (varies by state), and requires that recipients of TANF participate in activities aimed at moving them away from welfare (Office of Family Assistance). In Canada welfare to work programme requirements for lone parents vary by province. For example, in Alberta, to receive welfare assistance, parents of children over the age of 12 months are categorised as 'expected to work' (Human Services).

This change in policy is based on the belief that employment has the potential to address both income and health inequalities (Department for Work and Pensions 2007, Department for Work and Pensions 2008). However, the circumstances of lone parenthood can affect the health and wellbeing of parents and their children. A Cochrane review of randomised controlled trials of the health and wellbeing outcomes of welfare to work interventions on lone parents and their children is in the final stages of completion. The review of qualitative studies aims to complement the Cochrane review. While the review of qualitative studies is intended as an independent piece of work, there is the intention at a later date to compare the findings of both reviews.

The value of qualitative studies is their ability to explore and offer explanations about why circumstances occur and how this affects the individuals involved. This review will search for

explanations and proposed mechanisms linking the experiences of lone parents taking part in welfare to work interventions and the health and wellbeing of themselves and their children.

This qualitative review aims to capture information relating to the outcomes used in the Cochrane systematic review of quantitative studies examining the health and wellbeing of lone parents participating in welfare to work interventions.

Review aim and objectives

To describe and synthesise, using thematic synthesis methods, qualitative data reporting impacts on and links between health, well-being, and related socio-economic outcomes on lone parents and their children, following participation in welfare to work interventions.

The research questions are:

- What are the impacts of single parents participating in welfare to work interventions?
- In particular:
 - impacts on lone parents' health and wellbeing
 - impacts on lone parents' children's health and wellbeing
 - identifying links between lone parents participating in welfare to work interventions and health and wellbeing of themselves or their children
 - do single parents identify connections between welfare to work interventions and the health and wellbeing of themselves and their children?
 - Is it possible to identify mechanisms linking other socioeconomic effects of welfare to work with health and wellbeing?
 - How do the findings of the qualitative studies extend our understanding of the quantitative studies?

Plan of investigation

The SPIDER tool (Cooke, Smith et al. 2012) will be used to help define the inclusion criteria:

- **Sample:** Lone parents participating in welfare to work interventions
- **Phenomenon of interest:** Effect of welfare to work interventions on health and wellbeing of lone parents and their children
- **Design:** Interviews, focus groups, ethnography
- **Evaluation:** Reported effects of the phenomenon of interest
- **Research type:** Qualitative methods

Inclusion criteria

Sample

Studies of lone parents and their dependent children living in countries with established social welfare systems. In general, lone parents are defined as parents living solely with their children or with their children and other adults who are not the parent's partner, spouse, or the other biological parent of the child/ren. Dependent children are children aged 18 or under and living with one parent who is their sole or main carer. As these definitions can vary slightly between countries and interventions, the review will include studies involving lone parents and their children as defined by the study authors or as defined by interventions aimed at lone parents. (See amendments, page 9).

The review is restricted to interventions occurring in developed countries (taken to be the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries www.oecd.org). The searches will include publications dating from 1980 until 2013.

Phenomenon of interest

Welfare to work interventions delivered at any spatial scale (local e.g. city or state-wide, regional, national) and aimed at increasing labour market participation among lone parents, including support-based interventions with no element of compulsion such as vocational training, advice, financial incentives etc. (see amendments, page 9), and interventions involving compulsion to enter the labour market such as lifetime limits on benefit receipt, drops in the age of youngest child at which lone parents are exempted from requirements to work, workfare and financial sanctions for failing to comply with intervention requirements. Evaluations of in-work benefits such as Tax Credits will be excluded if they are aimed at the whole population, regardless of prior labour market participation or family status, but included if they focus on the impacts on lone parents of returning to work from benefits. These criteria match those of the Cochrane review of randomised controlled trials investigating lone parents and welfare to work interventions.

Design

Qualitative (retrospective or longitudinal) intervention studies will be included (interviews, focus groups, ethnography). Both the data collection and the data analysis should use qualitative methods, i.e. quantitative analysis of qualitative data will not be included.

Evaluation

Impacts

Areas of interest are:

- adult or child physical or mental health;
- adult or child wellbeing (e.g. quality of life, work/life balance, parenting behaviours, maternal role strain, self-efficacy, mastery);
- children's educational attainment;
- children's behavioural or social outcomes; health insurance or Medicaid coverage;
- economic impacts, such as income and employment.

Information that offers an explanation of how or why an intervention has a certain impact will also be collected.

Search strategy

The search strategy will match the strategy used for the systematic review of quantitative studies on the effects of welfare to work interventions on lone parents and their children. These searches will be updated for this review of qualitative studies. No filters or terms will be used to capture the qualitative studies as qualitative studies are not always indexed as such in bibliographic databases.

An Information Scientist will conduct the searches. Authors of included studies will be contacted to request information about unpublished studies. Known experts in the field will also be contacted. Extensive searches of relevant governmental, independent research institute and NGO websites will be conducted (examples include Manpower Services Development Corporation, National Evaluation of Welfare to Work Strategies, DWP, JRF, IFS, RAND Corporation, Riverside Gain Project, Gingerbread, One Parent Families Scotland, Social Policy Digest, Ray Marshall Centre, The Urban Institute). Grey literature databases will also be searched, including Gray Source, ALA Internet Sources Gray Literature, OpenSIGLE and OpenDOAR. We will draw on our information scientist's significant expertise in grey literature searching to identify other relevant studies. Some relevant studies may be hard to identify from titles and abstracts alone. For example, there may be some studies of all welfare claimants, which include data on lone parents as a sub-sample but do not make this clear in the title or abstract. We will be highly sensitive to any such studies. When searching for social interventions whose primary focus is not health outcomes, one can never be entirely sure that any searches are 100% comprehensive, as unlike systematic reviews of clinical interventions, the

intervention, study design and outcomes are likely to be more complex and heterogeneous (Ogilvie, Hamilton et al. 2005). We are in discussion with an information scientist regarding the best approach to developing a search strategy in order to ensure that both sensitivity and specificity of searches is optimised. See Appendix X for list of databases to be searched.

Data management

The information scientist will maintain an audit trail of databases searched and search terms used. All returned search results will be stored on an Endnote database, including information on the study source, inclusion decision and reasons for exclusion if necessary. Records will be kept of studies identified through other sources, including bibliographies, websites and author contacts. NVivo software will be used to capture data extraction and coding.

Critical appraisal

The critical appraisal criteria for qualitative studies will be based on those developed by Thomson et al (Thomson, Thomas et al. 2013). These criteria were adapted from Dixon-Woods and colleagues (2004). Each study will be assessed independently by two reviewers answering the questions with yes, no, or unclear. Studies will be excluded if the answer to questions 2 or 6 is 'no'.

1. Are the research questions/aim specified?
2. Are the research questions suited to qualitative enquiry?
3. Are the following clearly described?
 - a. sampling
 - b. data collection
 - c. analysis
4. Are the following appropriate to the research question?
 - a. sampling
 - b. data collection
 - c. analysis
5. Are the claims made supported by sufficient evidence/data/quotes?
6. Does the paper make a useful contribution to the review question? (assessed in light of answers to previous questions)

There is debate about whether qualitative studies should be excluded from synthesis on the grounds of study quality, as a poorly designed study could offer a valuable concept and a well-designed study may have little to offer. Therefore, the answers to the above questions will be considered along with the reviewer's overall opinion of the study and allocated a rating independently by the two

reviewers (such as: good, OK, not good but has some value, fatally flawed). These ratings will be compared and differences resolved through discussion and a third reviewer if necessary. Apart from excluding studies which are found to be 'fatally flawed' (i.e. do not report on qualitative data collected and analysed using qualitative methods, and do not make a useful contribution to the review question) it has been recommended that studies are not excluded on grounds of quality (Campbell, Pound et al. 2011). However, the critical appraisal questions are a useful method of ensuring the reviewers treat the papers as data (Campbell, Pound et al. 2011).

Data extraction and coding

Two reviewers will be responsible for selecting studies and for extracting and coding data. Each reviewer will independently validate the other's coding and data extraction. Discrepancies will be resolved by a third party. NVivo software will be used to capture data extraction. Data on type of intervention, setting, population characteristics, research questions, methodology, study design, sample frame, recruitment methods and findings will be extracted from the qualitative studies. The exact nature of the intervention, and any substantive implications thereof, will be carefully extracted from studies of any design. For instance, voluntary and compulsory schemes will be treated as discrete interventions and written up as such, with discussion of the implications for interpretation of the findings included in the narrative synthesis. Coding will include recording whether quotes are participant quotations (first order constructs), study author interpretation (second order constructs), or data for new concepts developed during the review (third order constructs).

The themes for coding will be determined by the content of studies selected by the systematic searching and inclusion criteria. Possible themes may include:

- overall experience of the intervention (positive or negative)
- content of the intervention
- training
- return to work
- confidence
- stress
- time poverty
- change in income
- use of childcare
- social support/networks

Synthesis

The methodology used for synthesis of the extracted data will be one which enables information from the data to be compared, contrasted and, if appropriate, facilitate further interpretation from the collected findings. Therefore, the synthesis will be based on techniques used in thematic synthesis, a methodology that has been developed to synthesise qualitative data based on Noblit and Hare's (1988) meta-ethnography techniques (Thomas and Harden 2008). Thematic synthesis involves searching for descriptive themes from relevant studies, these themes can then be used to develop analytical themes, with the aim of constructing interpretations that develop understanding further than the primary studies (Thomas and Harden 2008). Using Noblit and Hare's (1988) definitions, exploring the concepts that appear in the data will determine whether these concepts are similar across the studies ('reciprocal translation', page 39), conflict ('refutational synthesis', page 47), or enable further idea(s) to be developed that are additional to the separate concepts from individual studies ('line of argument synthesis', page 62). Attention will be paid to the order in which relevant papers are synthesised, by noting the date of included studies and ordering accordingly at the synthesis stage, as this may be important when developing line of argument themes and concepts. The context of individual studies and possible subsequent developments within this area of research may be determined by the passage of time (Campbell, Pound et al. 2003).

The interpretive synthesis methodology of meta-ethnography has the advantage of enabling evidence from quantitative studies to be incorporated. This would allow, at a later date, a comparison of this review of qualitative studies with those of the Cochrane review.

An ENTREQ statement will be used to describe the synthesis of the qualitative data to ensure there is a record of the key stages of this process: the literature search, selection and critical appraisal, and synthesis methods (Tong, Flemming et al. 2012).

Research outcomes

The review aims to synthesise findings on the potential impact of welfare to work policy interventions among lone parents on health and determinants of health. Impact on both parents' and their children's health and wellbeing will contribute towards understanding the long term outcomes of such policies. This review of qualitative studies has the potential to gain explanations of *why* particular schemes are beneficial or detrimental to intervention participants.

Dissemination

A report of the review will be produced, and an academic article will be prepared for publication. The report will be circulated to relevant policy makers, and will be available online. Presentations will be made to relevant stakeholders, with the aim of maximising the impact of the project findings.

Protocol amendments

Sample: studies with mixed samples of lone and couple parents, or in which the sample could not be determined were not included.

Intervention: Included studies were of compulsory welfare to work interventions or programmes. Welfare to work schemes with voluntary participation were excluded as these did not impact on receipt of welfare benefits.

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Appendix

List of electronic databases to be searched:

- Ovid MEDLINE(R)
- Embase Ovid
- ERIC
- Cinahl
- EconLit
- International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS)
- PsycInfo
- Soc index with full text (via Ebsco)
- Social Services Abstracts
- Sociological abstracts
- Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA)
- Web of Knowledge
- Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews (via Ovid)
- Proceedings first via OCLC
- Papers first by OCLC
- Ethos (British Library UK theses)
- Theses Canada
- OCLC dissertations WorldCat dissertations and theses
- Proquest Dissertations & Theses
- Australian theses program
- Open SIGLE
- Planex

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